



Why is Writing So Hard?

By Linda Balsiger, M.S., CCC-SLP

Written expression is one of the most daunting tasks that students face, and Central Oregon students are clearly struggling with writing, as seen from the following recent statewide assessment testing results:

Students meeting Oregon state standards in writing (2008-2009):

School District	4th grade	7th grade	10th grade
Bend-La Pine	51%	48%	56%
Redmond	45%	65%	67%
Sisters	65%	64%	54%
Crook County	36%	38%	28%
Culver	23%	35%	45%
Jefferson County	26%	18%	34%

*** Source: Oregon Department of Education (as reported by Bend Bulletin)

Why is Writing Important?

Writing is critical for success in today's fast-paced competitive world. To get into college, students must write a persuasive essay to market themselves. Once in college, courses require endless research papers and written essay responses on examinations. After college, the cover letter and resume are the first glimpse of a job applicant's potential and abilities.

In the workplace, emails are the most common form of written expression. A poorly written email can make the writer seem far less intelligent and educated than they may be. Countless other jobs require more sophisticated written expression in the form of proposals, position papers, business summaries, and technical reports. Written expression is a powerful form of communication and persuasion, and the ability to write well opens the door to many career possibilities.

Why is Writing so Difficult?

Written expression is a processing intensive activity. It requires the simultaneous execution and integration of a myriad of challenging components. Weaknesses in any one of these components can make the writing process overwhelming. The components are:

- 1) **Organization of Ideas:** A solid piece of writing must be well organized, with elements and devices that provide cohesiveness, transition between ideas, and flow. In school, these skills are learned for a variety of text structures, including: creative stories, expository passages, narratives, compare/contrast, and persuasion/opinion.
- 2) **Sentence Formulation:** Grammatical errors, sentence fragments, and run-on sentences can destroy a piece of written work. Sentences are the core of expression. Many students have great difficulty composing any but the most simple of sentences. Good writing contains compound and complex sentences using a variety of conjunctions, descriptive words, and sentence pattern variety.



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For example:

I like to play video games.

versus

Playing video games filled with warring aliens, crashing asteroids, and intergalactic adventures is my idea of a perfect Saturday afternoon.

- 3) **Spelling:** Poor spelling dramatically detracts from otherwise good writing, and can make the writer appear illiterate. With the advent of spell-check, does a child need to be able to spell? Yes! Spell-checkers require that you get “close enough” before appropriate choices are offered. The writer must also be able to distinguish homonyms such as *there/their*, *bare/bear*, *see/sea*, *wear/where*, and *your/you’re*. Many students can memorize spelling words for a test, but fail to retain them afterwards. Poor spelling can be caused by dyslexia, weak visual memory, deficits in sequencing (for letters or sounds), phonological processing deficiencies, or other disorders.
- 4) **Mechanics:** Capitalization and punctuation are important components of writing. Some children struggle to apply the most basic of these rules, while others master the basics but never learn when to use an apostrophe or comma.
- 5) **Handwriting:** Handwriting is a complex process. The writer must attend to letter formation and sizing, spacing between letters and words, and paragraph margins. Many children suffer from dysgraphia or difficulties with visual-motor-kinesthetic integration. Students with dyslexia also often struggle with handwriting, due to weaknesses in visual memory, sequencing, and directionality (b-d and p-q confusion).
- 6) **Editing and Proofing:** Once a piece of writing is complete, is it finished? Most kids would respond “Yes!” and gladly throw the pencil down. Editing, polishing, and proofing are critical steps that turn a rough piece of writing into a polished gem.

Is there hope?

Yes! Children can learn to master these components and produce good writing. If you have concerns about your child’s ability to write, seek professional help. The ability to write well is a critical life skill. For students with disorders of written expression, spelling, dyslexia, or dysgraphia, a variety of school accommodations and technology supports can also be made available to facilitate their written expression.

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